

## TEEN & CAREGIVER HANDOUT: WHAT ARE EATING DISORDERS?

Eating disorders are problems with the way people eat. They can harm a person's health, emotions, and relationships. There are several types of eating disorders. It's important to know that anyone can develop an eating disorder, no matter their gender, race, ethnicity, or socio-economic status.

### Anorexia

People with anorexia:

- eat very little on purpose. This can lead to a very low body weight, but sometimes, in atypical anorexia, weight loss does not lead to this because of starting with an elevated body weight. It's still dangerous and can lead to severe medical complications and even death.
- have an intense fear of weight gain.
- have a distorted body image. They do not see themselves accurately and may see themselves very differently than others see them. Individuals with anorexia often do not recognize the severity of their malnutrition.

People with anorexia are very strict about what and how much they will eat. They may think about food or calories almost all the time. To lose weight, some people with anorexia fast or exercise too much. Others may use laxatives, diuretics (water pills), or enemas.

### Bulimia

People with bulimia:

- overeat and feel out of control to stop. This is called binge eating.
- do things to make up for overeating. They may make themselves throw up on purpose after they overeat. This is called purging. To prevent weight gain they may use laxatives, diuretics, weight loss pills, fast, or exercise a lot.
- judge themselves based on body shape and weight.

People with bulimia eat much more (during a set period of time) than most people would. If a person regularly binges and purges, it may be a sign of bulimia. Unlike people with anorexia who are very low weight, people with bulimia may be thin, average weight, or overweight. People with bulimia often hide their eating and purging from others.

### Binge Eating

People with binge eating disorder:

- feel a loss of control when eating and overeat. This is called binge eating.
- eat large amounts even when they are not hungry.
- may feel upset or guilty after binge eating.
- often gain weight, and may become very overweight.

Many people with binge eating disorder eat faster than typical. They may eat alone so others don't see how much they are eating. Unlike people with bulimia, those with binge eating disorder do not make themselves throw up, use laxatives, or exercise a lot to make up for binge eating. If a person binge eats at least once a week for 3 months, it may be a sign of binge eating disorder.

### ARFID (Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder)

People with ARFID are extremely picky eaters and have little interest in food. They:

- eat a limited variety of preferred foods.
- may be turned off to foods due to the taste, feel, smell, temperature, or look of the food.
- may be fearful of eating due to a traumatic event.
- are not afraid of gaining weight.
- do not have a poor body image.

People with ARFID may be afraid that they will choke or vomit. They don't have anorexia, bulimia, or another medical problem that would explain their eating behaviors.



**Q How are eating disorders diagnosed?**

Health care providers and mental health professionals diagnose eating disorders based on history, symptoms, thought patterns, eating behaviors, and an exam. The doctor will check weight and height and compare these to previous measurements on growth charts. The doctor may order tests to see if there is another reason for the eating problems and to check for problems caused by the eating disorder.

**Q How are eating disorders treated?**

Eating disorders are best treated by a team that includes doctors, dieticians and therapists. Treatment includes nutrition counseling, medical care, and talk therapy (individual, group, and family therapy). The doctor might prescribe medicine to treat binge eating, anxiety, depression, or other mental health concerns.

The details of the treatment depend on the type of eating disorder and how severe it is. Some people are hospitalized because of extreme weight loss and medical complications.

**Q How do eating disorders affect health and emotions?**

**Anorexia** can lead to health problems caused by undernutrition and low body weight; people with anorexia may find it hard to focus and have trouble remembering things. Health and emotional problems may include:

- low blood pressure
- slow or irregular heartbeats
- feeling tired, weak, dizzy, or faint
- constipation and bloating
- irregular periods
- weak bones
- delayed puberty and slow growth
- feeling alone, sad, or depressed
- anxiety and fears about gaining weight
- thoughts of hurting themselves

**Bulimia** can lead to emotional problems, as well as health problems caused by vomiting, laxatives, and diuretics:

- low blood pressure
- irregular heartbeats
- feeling tired, weak, dizzy, or faint
- blood in vomit or stool
- tooth erosion and cavities
- low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression
- alcohol or drug problems
- thoughts of hurting themselves
- swollen cheeks (salivary glands)

**Binge eating** can lead to weight-related health problems, as well as emotional challenges:

- diabetes
- high blood pressure
- high cholesterol and triglycerides
- fatty liver
- sleep apnea
- have low self-esteem, anxiety, or depression
- feel alone, out of control, angry, or helpless
- have trouble coping with strong emotions or stressful events

**ARFID** may lead to health problems that stem from poor nutrition, similar to anorexia.

**If you think you may have an eating disorder**

**Tell someone.** Tell a parent, teacher, counselor, or an adult you trust. Let them know what you're going through. Ask them to help.

**Get help early.** When an eating disorder is caught early, a person has a better chance of recovery. Make an appointment with your doctor or an eating disorders specialist.

**Go to all appointments.** Treatment takes time and effort. Work hard to learn about yourself and your emotions. Ask questions any time you have them.

**Be patient with yourself.** There's so much to learn, and change happens a little at a time. Take care of yourself and be with people who support your recovery, health and well-being.

Adapted from: [kidshealth.org/en/teens/eat-disorder.html](https://kidshealth.org/en/teens/eat-disorder.html)